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Synopsis

Literature has, more often than not, been popularly perceived as a looking glass for the society of which it is an integral part. This is more so when it comes to a nation in its nativity. Literature provides the nation with anaura that becomes indispensable to the nourishment and growth of the national consciousness. Right from the middle of nineteenth century many Bengali academiciansseemed to have been exercised by the need to chronicle this complex literature of both the pre-colonial and the colonial period which, for them, was going to emerge as the cornerstone of the national/racial consciousness. In my proposed dissertation, I would like to deal with four important historians whose respective attempts to write a history of Bengali literature have given rise to a fortified history of Bengali literature. Sushil Kumar De, writing in the first decade of twentieth century, Sukumar Sen, Asit Kumar Bandopadhyay and Bhudeb Chaudhuri, writing in the latter half of twentieth century, will be the four historians whom I shall be using to understand the complex nature of literary historiography of twentieth century Bengal. All these four historians, if put together in a chronological order, form a mutual chain of direct reference and cross-references suggesting a fortified archive of both history and historiography.

However it is important to remember that apart from the four historians mentioned above there were other eminent writers as well who were in one way or the other expressing their views on or about history (of which literature is an important segment). Rabindranath Tagore, for example,in his essay “Bangla JatiyaSahitya” describes history and literature to share a close proximity. For him literature serves as a bridge between the distant and the here and now, the old world and the new one.Hence literature, in Tagore’s idea bridges the gap between anation’s present and its past.

Many of the historians and their respective historiography named above were informed and shaped by the dominant ideology of their own times; as a consequence, their histories leave gaps or lacunae, stories untold, hidden below the main strata of the social narrative. They could not, at places, transcend their ‘situatedness’ in their particular historical location. With this coincided an urge to establish a separate, exclusive “Bengali” identity which spearheaded from the time of the Bengal Renaissance. The Bengali identity was initially carved out in the shadow of the colonial master but gradually it attained a form of its own, not to mention the

(un)conscious process of selection that was undertaken while forming an identity corresponding to the nascent, emancipatory consciousness. Since the Bengal Renaissance the Bengali society was by and large divided into two groups – the reformist and the revivalist. While the reformists were still looking upto the 'freer' European ideal, the revivalists were going back to the Hindu past in search of an identity to counter the European influence. However, both the groups were rather exclusive in nature. Hence a large group of people was denied participation in this new defining identity formation. It is only natural that factors so complex would one way or the other condition the formation of a canon.

The literary history writing project gained currency from the nineteenth century onwards. Scholars and academicians like RamgatiNyayratna andDineshchanadra Sen were wielding their pens to form a concise history of Bengali literature which in turn would give voice to a culture and create a platform for the emerging culture. Incidentally this history writing project coincided with the construction of the nationalist self. While the first half of the twentieth century would witness a history heavily conditioned by its colonial subjecthood, the latter half would have a compulsion to cater to the specific needs of Bengali as aUniversity curriculum. Again, people like Asitkumar Bandopadhyay and Sukumar Sen were not merely writing for University syllabi but were also caught in the double bind of a cultural *and* a possible political shift. Hence even if they were not considering western civilization as *deus ex machina* for the consolidation and rise of a consolidated Bengali culture, they were admittedly informed and shaped by western, especially colonial, historiography.

Hence in spite of having a rich age-old literary tradition it was not until the western intervention that the emerging consciousness could have a literature suitable to its own stature. This hero-worshipping of western civilization finds a ready echo in Sushil Kumar De's *History of Bengali Literature in Nineteenth Century.* Published from Calcutta University in 1919, it was actuallythe dissertation submitted for the PremchandRaychand scholarship. His idea to write a history of Bengali literature in English serves many purposes at once. DineshchandraSen's translated version was yet to arrive and the increase in the number of English-educated *Bhadralok (*middle class*)*has been recorded to be the highest between 1887 and 1907. Thus De's attempt to write the history of a cultural sphere for a particular class had reasons both academic and political.

However, the formation of the Bengali literary canon in the latter half of the twentieth century did not overthrow the concept of a pre-colonial era completely, but used it to claim ancientness, to prove the existence of a pre-colonial rich tradition to defy the presence of colonial masters as guardian of the infant culture. Sukumar Sen does not merely confine his discussion within the predominant Hindu court culture but also deals at length with the *loksahitya* in the form of *panchali, kabigan* and so on. But his idea of *lokasahitya* is an idea too narrow to include the substratum of the society. Asit Kumar Bandopadhyay, on the other hand, mentions a few Sufi *padakarta*s but we are never given a clear picture of the contemporary Islamic tradition. Moreover, Bandopadhyay defines literature in Hindu religious term. Literature for him is the

‘dwelling place of Lord Jagannatha’ devoid of any staunch sectarian division. Ironically, twentieth century history of literature shows a deep anxiety about the ‘other’, much like Lord Jagannath’s dwelling place which does not allow anybody other than a Hindu within its territory.

Bhudeb Chowdhury starts writing in a post-colonial set up and it seems that he is aware of the lacunae left in the previous historiographicendeavour. He acknowledges the unavailability of Muslim writing on Muslim culture while, on the other, criticizes the inheritance of Persian culture as obscene and provocative (Note: Chowdhury, vol 1, page 355). The same idea continues to plague his discussion of modern literature as well.

The silence of women remains another such issue which is there in almost all the historians mentioned above. Swarnakumari Devi is perhaps one woman writer who was visible enough in the otherwise male dominated canon. Apart from her there are a few other women like MankumariBasu, GirindramohiniDasiwho manage to get mentioned. By the time these histories were written women’s education had already gained currency, and women were constantly taking part in forming the cultural sphere. In spite of their unavoidable presence in the cultural sphere the contemporary literary history remains uncannily silent about them.This silence directs towards one of those many problem areas that the literary historians were struggling with.

Therefore, my aim, in the thesis, would be to question these *aporias* or the *undit*(the unsaid) in the literary and cultural historiography of twentieth century Bengal with reference to the historians mentioned above. In a dissertation tentatively divided into five chapters along with an introduction and a conclusion I would like to deal separately with all the five historians, devoting a chapter to each. The tentative names for the chapters would be as follows – in the first chapter named “Ante-history” I would like to deal with the other works of literary history and the general trend of writing history which was inherited by the four historian mentioned above. The second chapter dealing with Sushil Kumar De is to be named “Sushil Kumar De and the Colonial Rhetoric”; the third dealing with Sukumar Sen would be named “Sukumar Sen: The Threshold of History”; the fourth one on Asit Kumar Bandopadhyay would be named “AsitKumar Bandopadhyay: The Construction of A Neo-Colonial Self”; while the fifth one featuring BhudebChaudhuri would be named “BhudebChaudhuri and the Inheritance of History” leaving a final one ”The Other Voices of History: From Rabindranath Tagore to Tapan Roy Chowdhury” where I wish to put emphasis on other writers and scholars who commented on the nature of history and or the place of literature in it.In this procedure I shall deal at length with their training as historians, the source material available to them and the Renaissance ideology which kept on informing them in one way or the other.In the course of a detailed discussion I shall try to find out whether it was possible to arrive at a more organic, inclusive history of literature, which, one needs to remember, does not cancel out the mode of historiography already available to us.

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